

Chapter 229

Brave Little Tailor

Clive stood up from where he had been crouching to examine one of the empty web sacks. The clearing turned out to only be the beginning, with empty web sacks hanging from trees or fallen to the ground, extending well back into the jungle. Clive had gone over them all, carefully examining the interior of each one.

“Unless there are some other people here that we weren’t aware of,” Clive said, “I would say that all of our cultists were snatched up by the blood weaver. The web sacks pack their victim in, nice and snug, and there are thirteen of these things that look like human moulds inside. Looks like she either ate the five that died completely and turned the rest, or the process has a failure rate.”

“So now we know for certain that we have to hunt this thing,” Sophie said. “How do we find it?”

“We don’t,” Clive said. “We’ve all seen what a silver rank monster can do. I doubt we could take the monster down if we caught it by itself, let alone with what I hope is only a small army of vampiric monsters. The weaver’s minions are something of a hive mind, controlled by the monster itself. Once we start fighting any of them, we’re fighting all of them. We can’t beat them all and the blood weaver on top.”

“We don’t know how long we have to stop whatever the cult is up to,” Belinda said. “As much as I like the backing off idea, don’t we have to go after it now, if it will take us to the cultists?”

“At this point, I don’t know how much the cultists have to offer us,” Clive said. “I doubt we’ll ever find them in a state where we can question them. Maybe if we kill the blood weaver they’ll regain some sense of self and be able to talk to us. More likely, we’ll have to try and find some clue from their corpses.”

“The cultists were a dangerous enough proposition when they were a bundle of cut-rate adventurers,” Neil said. “Now they have a silver-rank monster behind them? We’ve all seen what a silver-rank monster can do.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We can’t stop anything if we’re the blood puppets of some giant spider. Clive, where do we have to get to before we can take that thing down?”

“At the very least, Jason has to hit bronze rank,” Clive said. “The blood weaver is silver-rank tough, heals fast and can heal even faster by feeding on its own minions. Jason’s escalating damage is our only means of getting through that, even once we hit bronze.”

“Can’t he do that now?” Sophie asked. “He has an ability to get past higher-rank resistances, right?”

“That is a silver rank monster,” Clive said, “and not some lumbering giant he can outpace. At iron-rank he’s too slow, too weak and too frail. He’ll die before he can lock those afflictions in. And that is just considering the monster itself. The rest of us need to hold off the vampiric monster army long enough for Jason to get the job done. Given the magical density, we have to assume there will be a ready supply of bronze-rank monsters for that, and the cultists certainly will be. Maybe there’ll only be as many of them as there are web sacs around here, but from the state of this webbing, I think this is an older nest. I’m willing to bet that there’s more, and that’s a bet we’re gambling our lives with.”

“So you’re saying we need to run for the hills,” Jason said.

“We have the best training environment any of us will ever experience,” Clive said. “Every adventurer rises up during a monster surge and we have one that never ends, all to ourselves. We have to use it. I say we stop chasing the trail of the cultists and focus solely on getting as strong as we can, as quick as we can.”

“I completely agree,” Humphrey said. “I know that stopping the cult was hammered into us as the first priority once we got here, but now that path leads somewhere that we aren’t ready to go yet. I propose we walk right back out of here and start following the soul compass to abomination after abomination, taking on anything that gets in our path.”

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Neil amended.

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Humphrey agreed. “We stick to the training regimen, maximise our advancement. I’ll reach bronze before Jason, and Neil probably will as well. That’s our threshold to return. Sophie and Belinda will take longer than the rest of us, which is time we may not have. We don’t know that we have enough as is.”

Humphrey gave Belinda and Sophie a sympathetic look.

“It means that when we do go after the blood weaver, you will be the most vulnerable.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sophie said. “I’ll hold my own.”

“I’m pretty sure he meant me,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with Clive and Neil. Boosting bronze-rankers will give me the chance to carry my own weight.”

“Wait,” Neil said. “Did we just make the sensible decision and not charge into the hopeless fight? Go team!”

After trying to portal past the jungle, the team had also tried portals to other locations and had confirmed that portal abilities wouldn’t work at all. This forced them to extract from

the thick ring of jungle by tracking back the way they had come. It quickly became evident that their presence had already been noticed.

“There are monsters approaching from multiple sides,” Shade warned from Jason’s shadow as his other two bodies scouted the jungle around them. “Judging from their physical appearance, disparate nature and cohesive movement, I believe them to be the blood weaver’s vampiric puppets.”

The team had developed their teamwork enough that they had no need to discuss tactics as they moved into a defensive formation. In the tight confines of the dense jungle, Humphrey and Sophie stood guard over Neil, Belinda and Clive as Jason vanished into the darkness.

Onslow emerged and Clive vaulted lightly onto his back. Even at the very start of bronze rank, Clive’s power and speed attributes gave him the strength of a huge powerlifter and the agility of a tiny gymnast. Belinda also called on her familiars, the silver lantern floating above her and the living illusion, a flickering replica of herself that shimmered into existence at her side.

“Why only move on us now?” Neil wondered.

“They were waiting for us to go deeper into the blood weaver’s territory,” Clive said. “Now, we’re trying to leave.”

“We didn’t sense them at all.”

“Many spider-type monsters can use networks of webbing to track their prey over a wide territory,” Humphrey said.

“Clive didn’t mention that before,” Neil said.

“Clive didn’t know,” Clive said testily. “Maybe if adventurers were less dismissive about sharing information with the Magic Society then there’d be fewer gaps in our knowledge.”

“Focus,” Humphrey said. “Jason should be starting right about...”

An alien shriek echoed through the jungle. They sensed the approaching auras before they saw the monsters. It was a disparate group, bronze and iron-ranks mixed together, but the same thread ran through each of the different auras. It felt like a blood-soaked wire leash, held in the grip of an unseen master.

“I definitely don’t want that in my aura,” Sophie said.

Monsters came pouring out of the jungle, varieties they had encountered before in the city, but changed. Eyes were bloodshot, skin was pale and taught over ropy muscle. There were snakes with barbs lining their backs, two-headed cats and colourful, spike-

spitting frogs. Almost half their number were the ape-like creatures Clive had fought, but even more feral. Their was a crazed hunger about them as they rushed at the team.

Humphrey and Sophie leapt into action. Sophie was a veritable blur, deflecting flying spikes and crippling ape monsters one after the other. It was almost like they were standing still as fists and feet, elbows, knees and palm strikes were rained down on joints, throats and eyes. Despite the onslaught, her face was calm, her movements as clinical and precise as they were fast. She fought with the clean efficiency of a machine, with no waste, no hesitation and no mercy.

A two-headed cat leapt high over the other monsters, sailing through the air towards her. She threw out a hand and a blast of wind sent it hurtling back into the jungle.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (41%).

- Effect (iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

A barbed snake jumped at her from a low angle and she snatched it out of the air, one hand on each of its upper and lower jaws. She reeled her hands apart and the snake's head with it, not even pausing as she continued to square off with the ape creatures.

One of the bronze-rank apes emerged, faster and stronger than the others. It barrelled through its fellows as it charged at Sophie. She activated an ability and time slowed to a stop around her.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
 - Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 5 (91%).

 - Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.
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Sophie's massive acceleration power only gave her a fleeting moment of near-frozen time to act. She waved her arms rapidly back and forth in front of her, each sweep producing an arced blade of wind that froze the moment it was separated from her body.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (88%).

 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
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The frozen time ended after the briefest interval, but Sophie's quick movements had primed a wall of wind blades. The instant the power ended, they were all unleashed on the monster charging at her, shredding the hulking ape into a bloody mess. Its charge became a stagger and she kicked it square in the chest, bloodying her boot. It fell over backwards and didn't move again.

Although she was incredibly quick on her feet, Sophie was holding her ground, not moving far as she fended off attackers. Humphrey, in the meantime, was the sword to her shield, charging forward to take the fight to the enemy. He conjured up his enormous sword, stylised in the form of a dragon's wing, that was immediately wreathed in flames.

Ability: [Dragon Wing Sword] (Wing)

- Conjuration (fire).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a huge sword in the shape of a dragon's wing. Special attacks with the movement subtype performed with this weapon inflict additional damage.

 - Effect (bronze): Normal and special attacks made with this weapon inflict fire damage and inflict the [Burning] condition.

 - [Burning] (affliction, damage-over-time, elemental): Inflicts ongoing fire damage.
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The fire damage hardly seemed relevant as the sword brushed away enemies like fallen leaves.

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.

- Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.

Three of the ape monsters and a two-headed cat all but exploded, their bodies not even slowing the horizontal sweep of the enormous sword. Humphrey paid no mind to self-protection as he arrived amidst the monsters like a lobbed grenade. He was far from without protection, however, starting with the dragon scale armour he conjured directly onto his body.

Ability: [Dragon Armour] (Dragon)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a suit of dragon scale armour that confers strong physical protection and increases resistance to fire damage and effects.

- Effect (bronze): Armour confers increased resistance to non-physical damage and further increased resistance to fire damage and effects.

As Humphrey laid into the enemy, an illusory image fought beside him, harmless but distracting, making his attacks hard to anticipate. Just when the monsters thought they had the real Humphrey pegged, it would turn out to be his illusionary double. This was Belinda's familiar, Gemini, who could not only mimic allies, but switch-teleport with them. It used a mental connection with the mimicked ally to do so, like a more instinctual version of Jason's voice chat. It was an oddly intimate connection that allowed the ally to trigger the power.

The power of Belinda's familiar was quite similar to one of Humphrey's own.

Ability: [Attack of the Mirage Dragon]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Special Attack Affinity].
 - You are more likely to awaken special attacks than other ability types. Your special attacks have increased effect.
 - When you make special attacks, you can expend mana to create a short-lived, illusory double, replicating the attack. The illusion does not inflict damage or duplicate other effects from the attack but you can spend mana to switch-teleport with it, in the moment it is created. This is an illusion and teleport effect.
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With every special attack, he not only created another, short-lived double, but Gemini did the same, leaving four of Humphrey running around for the monsters to try and pin down. Only Humphrey's allies were able to see the hazy blur that signalled which ones were illusions.

Dashing into the swarm of attackers had opened him up to their attacks and some inevitably went for Humphrey's true body. Many were intercepted by well-timed but short-lived bubble shields, courtesy of Neil.

Ability: [Absorbing Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, drain).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and generates mana-over-time with a strength that scales with the amount of damage negated. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
 - Effect (bronze): Drains health and mana from the attacker and bestows it upon the recipient of the shield.
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Neil's absorbing shield simultaneously protected Humphrey and replenished his health and mana, allowing him to keep fighting at full strength. In addition to the drain effect, one of Neil's evolved racial gifts was incredibly valuable.

Ability: [Life Guard]

- Transfigured from [Elf] ability [Life Affinity].
- Effects used or received with a positive effect on life have greater effect.
- Using a shield-based essence ability on allies also bestows a heal-over-time effect.

If too many enemies were crowding on Humphrey, Neil would deploy his other bubble shield power.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking-back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.

While Humphrey and Sophie were both fighting multiple monsters, just the pair of them was not enough to cover every angle of approach. Monsters that tried to snake into the gaps were met by elemental attacks from Onslow and bolts of force from Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda used her spurious sorcerer ability, granting her the power to use a wand from which she was blasting bolts of fire.

Clive's weapons were still stowed in his storage space as he sat atop Onslow, chanting out an extremely lengthy spell. When he was done, a huge red and gold eye appeared in the sky like a celestial body. It had the look of a fiery nebula, resembling an angry version of the eye in the torso of Jason's familiar, Gordon.

Ability: [Eye of Karma] (Karmic)

- Spell (zone, retribution).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Creates a wide-area zone. Within the zone, all damage inflicted by enemies or by effects generated by enemies cause disruptive-force damage to be inflicted on the enemy that was the source of the damage.

- Effect (bronze): Whenever damage triggers the zone effect, the damaged ally gains an instance of [Good Karma] and the enemy gains an instance of [Bad Karma].

- [Good Karma] (boon, holy): Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced; this does not reduce the retributive damage suffered by enemies with [Bad Karma]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Bad Karma] (affliction, holy, retribution): A portion of damage you deal to enemies with [Good Karma] is also suffered by you as transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, to a maximum of 100% damage return.

The team was spending mana like water, knowing that mana recovery was one of their greatest strengths. Clive, Neil and Sophie all had powers that would replenish the mana of team mates within their overlapping auras, with Clive and Neil also having spells to replenish team mana.

After completing the zone spell, Clive pulled out his weapons and started blasting away. They were not as effective without the time to set up ritual enhancements, but were still potent weapons. He also started replenishing Onslow's powers.

The monsters attacking Humphrey and Sophie were now harming themselves as a result of the zone spell, but the sheer number of enemies threatened to overrun the team. From Clive's quick count, there were at least thirty, not counting however many Jason was off fighting in the jungle.

In spite of the team's efforts, however, the monsters still threatened to overwhelm them. Belinda started chanting her own long spell, and just as it seemed like the team would be overrun, the battlefield shifted.

Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Spell (illusion, dimension, teleport).
- Cost: Extreme mana.

- **Cooldown:** 1 hour.
 - **Current rank:** Iron 4 (16%).
 - **Effect (iron):** You and your allies take on illusionary forms of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.
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Just as the team's formation was about to be broken up by the press of opponents, Belinda's spell detonated it. The team was randomly teleported, as were the monsters. The teleport was short and relatively gentle, barely fazing those members of the team sensitive to it. The monsters were thrown into confusion by their sudden displacement and the seeming disappearance of their enemies. Unable to see through the illusionary shrouds now covering the team, they milled about in confusion.

Belinda's power was the keystone of one of the team's tactics for engaging larger groups, which Jason dubbed the 'Brave Little Tailor' strategy. They made judicious attacks that prompted the monsters to attack one another, their discord briefly disrupting the thread of control in their aura. On top of the monsters harming one another, Clive's zone spell inflicted even more damage.

The controlling force quickly reasserted itself, but the sudden chaos had given the team time to gather together. Jason had notified them that all the surviving monsters had gathered close and he emerged from the shadows. It was just in time to vanish with the team as Neil used an ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- **Special ability (dimension).**
 - **Cost:** Extreme mana.
 - **Cooldown:** 6 hours.

 - **Current rank:** Iron 8 (64%).

 - **Effect (iron):** Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.

 - **[Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking):** Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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When the team re-emerged from the dimensional space a few short moments later, the landscape had been transformed into a horrifying Tartarus. The death energy of Neil's Reaper power had riven the jungle around them, leaving dead and rotting monsters

amongst blackened and withered jungle. The undergrowth was black mulch underfoot, while the wood of the trees had rotted and split, sending them tumbling to the ground.

A few bronze-rank monsters had survived, but they were hurt and no longer had numbers on their side. The team made short work of them.

“Was anyone bitten in all of that?” Clive asked. “Vampire bites can have some unpleasant effects.”

“Their teeth only found my armour,” Humphrey said.

“I took a few claws and a spike or two, but no bites,” Sophie said.

Jason used his affliction absorbing power on Sophie, cleansing the poison of the spitter-frog spines.

“My blood powers were quite effective,” Jason said. “Turns out vampires are a bit susceptible to blood magic.”

“We can have the post-fight discussion later,” Humphrey said. “For now, we put as much distance between us and that spider as we can.”